

December 31, 2017
What do we need to Re-solve?
Matthew 2:1-21

Tomorrow is January 1, ***2018!*** It seems like only yesterday we were anticipating January 1, 2017, or (for some of us), January 1, 2000 (when the world was supposed to end).

Looking back on 2017, how was the year?

366 days from today will be January 1, 2019. When you look back over 2018, what do you want to look back on? What do you need to do to make that happen?

This morning, as we think about that, let's look at three groups of people in the Matthew 2.

The Magi: People with a Purpose (2:1-12)

The Magi are most likely priests or "wise men" from Persia (present day Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and eastern Turkey/Armenia). They were not ethnically or religiously Jewish, but Persian, Armenian and Arabic and likely followers of Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrian priests were diligent astrologers and astronomers, who believed the stars heralded momentous events and the birth of human beings destined for greatness (in 66 AD, Roman historians document a visit of Persian magi to Rome, Haley's Comet was visible that year).

The Magi are religious and political leaders of the Parthian Empire, Rome's rival, on its eastern frontier. For the better part of 400 years, the Parthians and the Romans fought over the border.

However, these high-ranking officials see a star. And they choose to follow it, even though it leads them into enemy territory. They come without announcement. They come without any guarantee of safe passage or parlay. But they come, despite the risks, because somehow, somewhere, somehow in their studies or through divine revelation, they believe that what is happening is THAT important. They believe a "King of the Jews" has been born – probably referring to the long-promised Messiah of Jewish Scriptures.

There is already a King of the Jews, Herod the Great, who had rebuilt the Temple. There are "better" experts on the Jewish Scriptures, the chief priests and teachers of the law. The arrival of the Magi with their strange words is shocking and threatening to the powers-that-be.

The arrival of the Magi would be like high ranking Iranian cabinet ministers arriving, unannounced in Jerusalem today, looking for the brand new Prime Minister of Israel. Their visit and their words would certainly be seen as a threat to the present government.

The reason Matthew includes this story is to show how people who are wise, even non-Jewish people who are wise, seek out Jesus. The Magi were willing to leave their

comfortable palaces and travel at least 1500 kms across the desert, carrying a lot of valuable. They were willing to cross the frontier into enemy territory. They were willing to bring a message that they knew would be perceived as a threat. They were willing to change their whole identity by worshipping Jesus as the Messiah, the promised King. They *"they returned to their country by another route"* – literally by another way, road, or manner of life. It's the same word Jesus uses when He says, *"I am the **Way**, the Truth, and the Life."* Early believers described themselves as *"followers of the **Way**."*

By the end of 2018, I want to be able to look back and say, *"I kept coming back to Jesus. day after day, week after week, hour after hour, I kept coming back to Jesus: asking for wisdom. Seeking His guidance. Praying for people I love. Praying for and caring for my neighbour. Asking how I can serve Him with all my heart, mind, strength, and soul."*

Coming to Jesus is not a one-time thing. It's a constant, moment-by-moment discipline I have to choose. I choose to worship Him, every day. Following Jesus may mean I take a risk (or two or three). Following Jesus may mean I change the way I think, act, and live. Am I willing to do that? Are you?

Herod and the Priests: People with Potential, but ... (2:13-18)

Herod and the priests should know better. They are the ones who should know about the Messiah. Herod certainly should have known where the Messiah was to be born, but he has to ask the chief priest. At least they know: *"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet (Micah) has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"*

Despite the wonder, mystery, and disturbing visit and news the Magi bring, neither Herod nor any Jewish religious official make the journey. It's less than 10 kms. It's less distance than from here to either Coalhurst or Coaldale. But they would rather watch the equivalent of Sunday afternoon football or lounge at the Mount of Olives Country Club.

Only later, does Herod think through all that has happened. How does he react? Does he seek for truth? Does he seek out Jesus to worship Him?

He gets furious. He goes further. In the darkest passage in the Christmas narratives, Herod orders the genocide of all boys two years old and under around Bethlehem.

Yes, Jesus may turn your world upside down. Yes, Jesus may challenge your priorities. Yes, Jesus may upset the apple carts in your life.

Sometimes we present the good news like this: You've sinned. Jesus can forgive your sin. Accept Him as Saviour. Confess your sins. Any you will go to heaven when you die. That's it. That's the "full" gospel.

Actually that's not the full gospel at all. Those statements are all true. We have all sinned. Jesus can forgive all our sins. We do need to confess them and He will forgive us. We will be with Him, eternally. But that's only part of the gospel. The good news is much more than this. Jesus describes coming to faith in Him as being "born again." We start life over NOW. And in this new life, NOW, we can live as we were created to live: we were created to praise and worship God; we were created to live "in Him image" NOW, to be His stewards NOW, to be His ambassadors NOW, and to reflect His love into our world NOW.

We change the world by living in His Spirit, NOW. Paul encourages us, *"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit"* (Galatians 5:22-26).

At the end of 2018, I want to look back and say, *"I tried to walk in step with Spirit every moment of every day. I crucified and put to death some of those passions in my life that lead me away from God: love of money, lust for power, desire for pleasure. I have tried to live a life full of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."*

Following Jesus may not mean I get ahead as much as I would like, but I know it will make a difference in the lives of others. It will make a difference for my family. It will, hopefully, make a difference in our church. And it will make a difference in the community.

Am I willing to take that risk and (potentially) make those sacrifices? Are you?

Joseph and Mary: People with Priorities (2:19-23)

Joseph has been described as the "silent saint." Nowhere in Scripture is any word he ever said recorded. But this is what we know about Joseph:

1. **He loved God.** He was faithful to God and His Law (Matthew 1:19)
2. He balanced that with **genuine compassion and love for people:** when Mary became pregnant, Joseph *"did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly"* (1:19). It was not just about him or him-and-God.
3. **He prayed** often – undoubtedly baring his pain and anguish to God, but also **listening to God:** *"After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'"* (1:20-21).
4. He listened to **and obeyed God**, even when it involved risk, even when it cost him his reputation, *"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife"* (1:24).
5. He listened to and obeyed God, **even when it cost him** his home and his

livelihood: *"An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod"* (2:13-15). He was willing to be a refugee for God, travelling 700 rough, dangerous kilometres to be a struggling stranger in a strange and hostile land.

What do we know about Mary?

1. **Mary loved God.** She was faithful to God and His Law.
2. **She listened to God.** When the angel comes to her, she is willing to listen, even though the words are very disturbing and challenging (Luke 1:26-37).
3. **She is willing to be honest with God, even question Him.** She brings her doubts and struggles to God: *"How could this be ..."* (Luke 1:34)
4. **She is willing to take a huge risk and follow God.** Some of the most powerful words in Scripture are Mary's response to the angel, *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled"* (Luke 1:38).
5. **She knows Scripture and sees God's bigger plan at work.** Unlike Herod, priests, and teachers, she is open to the possibility that God is doing things in the world. Her song in Luke 1:46-55 is full of imagery draws from the prophets about the Messiah, looking forward to His coming in power, justice, and love. These are the last recorded words that Mary says.
6. **She takes time to reflect and worship.** One of the interesting comments about Mary is that *"she treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart"* (Luke 2:19, 2:51). She sees God at work.

Mary and Joseph, together, say very little. But their lives – their love for God, their willingness to listen to God, their willingness to obey God, their willingness to take risks for God, their willingness to make sacrifices in obedience to God, and their faithfulness to one another – are monumental. These are people who walk the walk.

At the end of 2018, I want to be able to say I walked the walk. I (hope) I don't have to leave my life behind and walk 700 kms into exile (Slave Lake, AB or Prince Albert, SK)!

- I do hope I take time to get to know God: to read Scripture, pray, and listen.
- I do hope that I take time to see what God is doing in the world, in our community, in our church, and in my life, and get on board with that.
- I do hope that God gives me opportunity to reflect His love by being gracious, by taking time for someone, by sharing words of encouragement, by telling other people about Jesus, that I actually do it. I do hope I'm obedient to do that.
- I do hope that I may follow a different Way, Jesus' Way, faithfully.